

## EMMELINE B. WELLS

- ★ **HISTORICAL 1828 - 1921**
- ★ **Women's Suffrage Leader**
- ★ **Editor**

Emmeline B. Wells was instrumental in the suffrage movement of Utah women. In 1887, when Congress took away the right to vote from Utah Territory women, she joined with others to form the Woman Suffrage Association of Utah. They succeeded in their cause and Utah women were again granted the right to vote in 1896 when Utah became a state.

Emmeline was born in Petersham, Massachusetts in 1828. Her father died when she was very young. She graduated at age 14 from New Salem Academy and taught school. She joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1842. She married James Harris and in 1844 they migrated to Nauvoo, Illinois. After the murder of Joseph Smith, Emmeline's month-old son died and her husband deserted her. She married Newel K. Whitney as a plural wife and traveled to Utah as a pioneer. Newel Whitney died in 1850. She married Daniel H. Wells in 1852. She was unshakable in her commitment to plural marriage and felt that women's rights and plural marriage were complementary. "In plural marriage a woman found the personal freedom and independence to exercise her rights as a member of society." She was self-reliant and was an early advocate of women's rights.

Emmeline became the editor of *The Woman's Exponent* in 1877. This publication was an attempt to give the world a view of LDS women as intelligent individuals and responsible wives and mothers. They hoped to change the popular image of themselves as "stupid, degraded, heart-broken" victims of polygamy. The *Exponent* advocated women's rights. Its slogan was, "The Rights of the Women of Zion and the Rights of the Women of all Nations." Feminist articles and speeches were frequently quoted in the publication. Emmeline joined with female writers, Susa Young Gates and Louisa Lula Greene, to establish the Woman's Press Club in 1891. Its purpose was to encourage women's literary efforts.

One of her most ambitious undertaking while serving as President of the LDS Relief Society was to establish a Church-wide program encouraging women to grow and store wheat. For fifty years Emmeline administered the Relief Society's widespread operations. They included buying, selling and loaning storage grain. The women contributed 2,000 bushels to provide relief to southern Utah when the area experienced a severe drought from 1889-1901. Carloads of flour were sent to San Francisco following the 1906 earthquake and many more were sent to China the following year to relieve famine. Over 200,000 bushels of wheat was sold to the U.S. government during World War I. Emmeline received personal commendation in 1919 from President Woodrow Wilson.

Emmeline enjoyed friendships with women's suffragettes, Susan G. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Carrie Chapman Catt. She represented Utah women in the National Women's Suffrage Association and the National and International Councils of Women. She served as liaison between Mormon and non-Mormon women and helped bring the LDS community into the mainstream of American society. This extraordinary woman is honored with a marble bust placed in the Utah State Capitol in 1928.